EDUCATION, PERCEPTION, AND CHALLENGES: THE ERRATIC CASE OF TRIBAL LIFE IN WAYANAD, KERALA

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ABSTRACT

The uncertainty and irregularity of making the resources available to communities that are alienated from mainstream society have caused instability in providing necessary support to empower and uplift the existing situation of the tribal communities in the Wayanad district of Kerala. Though there have been continuous efforts post-independence of India to make available the resources to the tribal communities, the living conditions including the educational facilities have not undergone substantial improvement. The journey from exclusion to inclusion has made the lives of tribes challenging and involved struggles to equip them with the basic rights that the country provides its citizens. This research paper aims to delineate the perception and challenges of education made available to the tribal communities in Wayanad by examining the facilities, schemes, and development policies made available to the tribal communities. The conclusive findings showcase the lagging, irregular, and irresponsible attitude of authorities towards the tribal communities in Wayanad from the viewpoint of the education facilities provided to them.

KEYWORDS: *Education, Kerala, Scheduled tribes, tribal communities, Wayanad*

INTRODUCTION

Since the independence of India, there have been constant efforts from government and non-governmental agencies to provide sufficient support to enhance the situations, lifestyle, and existence of tribal communities in various parts of the country. Though many schemes and programmes are still being continued from such a perspective, there has been very less output satisfying the actual requirements and necessities of the communities. The discriminatory acts of mainstream society towards the backward classes and scheduled tribes hinder the overall efforts and policies made to uplift the living conditions of the scheduled tribes. The reach of opportunities proposed by various agencies extended to minorities and backward communities such as the tribes is still questionable (Isac, 2011, p. 2).

In such existing circumstances, the relevance and significance of education are high because it is very essential to improve the quality of life. The development, improvement, and transformation of an individual mainly depend on the education, orientation, and knowledge regarding the situations around them which is crucial in the case of tribal communities that are alienated from the mainstream community. At the core, the development of an individual or community can be interpreted as how they can satisfy their demand in daily life (Deshmukh, 2004). The tribal population's habitation regions make up a substantial portion of the country's undeveloped areas. The Scheduled Tribes are one of India's most economically disadvantaged and neglected communities. The Scheduled Tribes are one of India's most economically disadvantaged and neglected communities. Although Scheduled Tribes are a minority, they account for around 8.2% of India's overall population.

Indian Constitution's Article 46 provides the promotion of educational interests of the tribal people. Besides, Articles 330, 332, and 334 ensure reservation rights to the elective and non-elective bodies. Diversity, inclusion, and multicultural perspectives of the Indian society are appreciable, however, the applicability and practicality of reducing the challenges and struggles of tribal communities go in vain. Wayanad district in Kerala accounts for a majority of tribal communities in Kerala. This South West region has the green forestry of the Western Ghats exists as a hotspot of biodiversity in the world where the tribal communities safeguard and live utilising its resources. Wayanad has several tribal communities including the Adiyan, Kurichya, Kattunaikan, Kuruman, and the Paniya (Paul, 2013, p. 12) having great importance in the history of the land. This research paper aims to delineate the perception and challenges of education made available to the tribal communities in Wayanad by examining the facilities, schemes, and development policies made available to the tribal communities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been various research and surveys conducted on the education provided to the tribal communities in Wayanad and its problems. Scholars have traced different aspects that hinder the proper implementation of the system referring to the available facts and figures. Asha (2020) concentrates on issues such as the low literacy level of tribal communities and concerns over their high

dropout rate. She finds the educational challenges faced by the tribal students as the major reason for the cause and suggests solutions to overcome them. The paper also points to the dawdling progress of policies aimed at the improvement of literacy rate, which has created a wide disparity between the literacy rates of the mainstream society and the scheduled tribes. Similarly, Swamy and Hema (2011) pointed out the dismal state of literacy among the Paniya tribal community in Wayanad along with the reasons for low literacy rates and educational attainment. The disadvantaged and backward classes had been excluded from basic education which projected the cause to lack of knowledge and connection with the mainstream community. This has been discussed as a complex socio-political process having multiple roots and causes.

Following the changes and updates, Joy and Srihari (2014) stated certain reasons such as negative attitude towards schooling, peer influence, alcoholism of parents, early responsibility, caste-related issues, and health issues as the primary reasons for dropout among the tribal communities. There have been certain initiatives such as Gothravelicham at the local level and the Breakfast project to reduce dropouts among the scheduled tribes in Wayanad which could find solutions to a limit.

Malith (2018) mentions that despite enormous resources provided by the government to support education, the results remain insufficient due to social situations, economic factors, inadequate infrastructure, lack of interest and lack of resourceful teachers. The paper states that

> "In a tribal area in Wayanad there is no insecurity but owing to the many challenges tribal are encountering such as lack of land, lack permanent livelihoods, lack of conducive environment for tribal children at home which encourage children to drop out other and challenges floundering by tribal education in general."

(Malith, 2018, p. 151)

EDUCATION, PERCEPTION AND CHALLENGES

The geographical, cultural, and social situation of the tribes in Wayanad does not allow them to be closely acquainted with the mainstream society by accessing the education facilities and infrastructure provided to them. Instead, the natural and socially made alienation of the tribal communities, mainly due to their lifestyle, struggles to pace with the speed of the mainstream society, and discriminatory attitudes of people outside their community, allows them to depend on the available resources provided by the governmental agencies and others.

Efforts in the form of schemes implemented by the Kerala state under the tribal sub-plan had proposed schemes for providing better educational facilities to bright ST students, repairs and maintenance of tribal hostels, and providing assistance to higher education. Dr. Nitheesh Kumar, district coordinator of the 'Gothraprabha' project initiated by the Kerala government says, "The higher education of tribal students in Wayanad is in shambles. Around 40% of the students who appeared for the Plus 2 examinations this year failed. Among the few students who clear higher secondary examinations, most don't continue the studies." (Meethal, 2021). It was reported that the drop-out rate in 2013 of Adivasi Dalit students was 95% during the school period and 80% of the seats in other districts reserved for Scheduled Tribe students were illegally diverted to the General category. There was a protest at the Adi Sakthi Summer School, an Adivasi Dalit students' collective against the casteist and racial discrimination that does not allow tribal students to get admission to higher educational institutions in Wayanad (Roy, 2020).

The recent COVID-19 situation and the sudden shift to utilising technology integrated online mode of education had also affected the education of students from tribal communities who did not have enough facilities, resources, and permanent solutions to overcome the challenge. Sumi Vishnudas, a social scientist says,

> "The high school dropout rate is leading to the educational backwardness of these children. These children are away from any sort of communication from schools and other educational activities during the lockdown. Even in the normal course, the educational gap between the tribal children and children from the general category is widening. So the government must take steps to fill the gap."

(Nandini, 2020)

Specifically, tribal colonies in the district of Wayanad have witnessed mainly offline classes due to the lack of infrastructure made available in the government schools that are located in remote areas. The pandemic situation affected the continuity of their studies while the mainstream society managed to equip them with basic infrastructure as part of several initiatives by the government such as broadcasting classroom lectures through the Kite Channel. A tribal activist, T. Krishnan notes the serious issue of the lack of infrastructure as,

> "Many parents, especially in tribal communities such as the Paniya, Kattunayaka, and Adiya, are yet to understand the relevance of online classes. Forest hamlets such as Kurichiyad, Chettyalthur, Kumizhi, Pampumkolly, Manimunda, and Ponkuzhi lack even proper electricity supply, not to mention Internet connectivity."

(Manoj, 2020)

If the literacy rate of tribes is compared to that of the mainstream community in Kerala, it is very low. It indicates the requirement for overarching support that integrates the health, living, and economic conditions of the people in the tribal colonies. The formal education, which has a strong inclination towards the dominant group as it is designed by the representatives of the mainstream

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society, there has to be sufficient support to overcome the challenge of language, culture, and competency. The lack of mass media involvement, unofficial child labour, unsatisfactory living conditions, unstable financial background, insufficiency of healthy food, insecurity at various levels, casteism, lack of adequate attention and inadequate government aid at the required time, early marriage, and inferiority complex enforced by the mainstream community are some of the other factors that affect the education of tribal students in Wayanad.

For the purpose of tribal development, the Government of India had raised funds since the First Five Year Plan and brought several plans and schemes to implement at various tribal settlements. The Janshala Programme was such an initiative of the Government of India in collaboration with UNICEF and associated agencies. It provided primary education more accessible to the students of the tribal communities, backward classes, marginalised, and minority groups (Kabitakumarisahu, 2014). Following such initiatives, there were several other schemes such as Multi-Grade Learning Centres, Alternative Schooling, Girivikas, Gurukulam, The District Primary Education Programme, Model Residential Schools, Hostels for ST Girls and Boys, Scheme for the establishment of Ashram Schools in Tribal Sub-Plan areas, the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme, Pre-Matric Scholarship for ST students, Vocational Training, special provisions for disabled students, single teacher schools, Saakshar Bharat Mission, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Gothravelicham project, Navachedana, Samagra, Gothra Sarathy, Gothrathalam, Gothra Bandu, etc. The list goes on with renewed schemes every year spending crores of rupees.

However, the question remains prevalent on why has there been no substantial improvement since several decades of the continued provision of schemes and programmes by the various governments and non-governmental agencies. The issue exists in the adaptability of students of the tribal communities to the existing curriculum, language, and teaching methods. It would be better if the government appoints permanent, qualified, and interactive teaching staff from the tribal community itself to provide classes to the students from the tribal communities. The shortage of qualified teachers is a hindrance to quality education which also affects the education of students from the tribal communities. Temporary posts of such teachers have to be made permanent so as to provide an uninterrupted teaching-learning facility. Infrastructure has to be improved which is a challenge for the government even after several decades. In order to equip the students from tribal communities to compete with the students from mainstream society, they have to receive adequate infrastructural developments, economic assistance, and proper implementation of reservation. It would be better to teach the students of the tribal communities in their medium of language and gradually provide a strong base to make them learn English and other foreign languages. Foremost, it is important to give orientation to reduce their lack of confidence and the presence of an inferiority complex that is a result of the thought and ideology implemented in the society that the backward classes are culturally and socially lower than the mainstream society. Though sufficient legal aspects are pertinent in the country, the people in tribal communities lack knowledge and support to get the benefits of the rights provided to them.

CONCLUSION
It is not the remodelling and scrapping of their roots which is the agenda of education, but the soul interest has to make them equipped with the knowledge, competence, and resources to make themselves empowered. "The tribal school education and hostel training have to be re-looked at with adequate inputs on various aspects of their life and culture and redesigning training components of teachers appointed in a tribal setting. Tribal development plans and Tribal sub plan (TSP) have to include tribal education and make provisions for professionally trained personnel for ensuring their sustainable development." (Thangadurai, 2020, p. 2111). Though the primary responsibility to enhance and empower the tribal communities through education is for the government, it also requires the immense support of the mainstream society as well as the people of the tribal communities. The perception towards the tribal settlements, their lifestyle, and existence has to be positive in order to implement equality and inclusion within the diverse conditions of their cultural, social, and living conditions. Discrimination and exclusion would increase inferiority, making the tribes get further alienated from the mainstream resources and facilities. In the same way, the attitude and cooperation towards government policies and schemes should be positive from the side of the tribes which would help them to get empowered to face challenges in life.

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